

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Almost a century has passed since the term “baroque” was first used in a literary-critical context, though it had long been a familiar descriptor for a particular period of architecture, art and music. A new interest in seventeenth-century poetry developed during the heyday of expressionism in Germany and “baroque” perspectives in literary analysis attracted increased attention. The term was understood and used in various ways, some of them contradictory, as will emerge in the following chapters. Engagement with seventeenth-century literature and the idea of the baroque intensified after the Second World War, and by the end of the twentieth century the concept had become a familiar one, not least in Scandinavia. In Iceland, however, the notion has been little explored, even though in recent years we find occasional scholarly references to “baroque style,” “baroque culture,” and “baroque theology.” The time is overdue for an examination of post-Reformation Icelandic literature in the light of baroque research and discussion in other countries. And in any such discussion pride of place belongs to Iceland’s greatest seventeenth-century poet, Hallgrímur Pétursson.

Though Hallgrímur’s poetry is multifaceted he is best known as a writer of hymns—the finest such poet in Icelandic literary history. He lived at a time when Lutheran hymn composition was blossoming in northern Europe. His younger contemporaries were Thomas Kingo (1634–1703) in Denmark and Petter Dass (1647–1707) in Norway. They were the most accomplished hymn-writers of their day and are

now regarded as the principal representatives of the baroque literary culture in their respective countries. We may ask whether the same is true of Hallgrímur. Analysis of the achievement of all three poets has tended to reflect modern tastes and preoccupations. Critics have been inclined to dismiss the seventeenth century and its poetry as unremarkable, and the excellence of individual poets as somehow uncharacteristic of the overall period. In 1854 one writer claims that Dass was a major poet and thus atypical of his time (Sejersted 1995, 110), while in 1917 Kingo was described as an author of some originality, and therefore perhaps independent of Arrebo, the Germans and their contemporaries (Jelsbak 1999, 103). Halldór Laxness's 1942 view of Hallgrímur reflects a similar perspective. Though he claims that the essence of the seventeenth century as a period finds its most perfect expression in Hallgrímur's verse (Halldór Laxness 1942:61), Laxness is generally dismissive of the poet's contemporaries: "the spiritual life of poets was so confused, their emotional life so regressive, that much of their poetry can only be described as sheer lunacy."¹ Accordingly, Hallgrímur's achievement is viewed primarily in terms of his individual genius: "the indefinable magic of the born genius [is] everywhere in evidence in his poetry."² Without wishing to underestimate the crucial importance of individual genius in literary creativity, the present study seeks to examine Hallgrímur Pétursson the poet in the context of his life, times and society, both at home in Iceland and abroad. Attention will be paid to his social circumstances, to the literary genres he favored, and to the distinctive achievement of his major works.

Baroque literary research has made significant advances in Europe over recent decades. The origins of the baroque have been traced to Italy and Spain, before it spread throughout Europe in a variety of forms. Baroque research has certainly flourished among German scholars, and their work has greatly influenced scholars in other countries, especially in Northern and Eastern Europe. The notion

1. sálarlíf skáldanna [á 17. öld] svo brenglað, tilfinningalífið öfugsnúið, að mikinn hluta þessa skáldskapar er ekki hægt að flokka öðruvísi en geðveiki (Halldór Laxness 1942, 44). The article was first published in *Iðunn* (1932); a revised version was included in *Vettvangur dagsins* (1942), a collection of Laxness's papers. All references are to this latter version.

2. óskilgreinilegur yndisleiki hins fædda snillings [. . .] alstaðar nálægur í ljóði hans (Halldór Laxness 1942, 72).

of the baroque was long used to denote a particular style, but many scholars, not least in Germany, also saw fit to apply the term to a period of literary history. Despite much discussion and disagreement about its meaning the term is now widely deployed, and many scholars accept that it makes it easier to define and delimit the period between humanism and the Enlightenment, even though the term was unknown at that time, and many literary genres, styles and subjects flourished during those years. However, there is still much debate as to whether it is appropriate to talk about a particular baroque period, or how the chronological limits of any such period can be determined. In the last decade Scandinavian scholars have suggested that it would be better to think in terms of baroque texts rather than a baroque period—that is, a particular poetic mode associated with a specific social class at a particular time and with its own distinctive features of style and presentation. In this way disagreements about chronology can be minimized, and due attention paid to other texts from the same period that bear no obvious marks of the baroque.

Scholars have suggested that seventeenth-century Europe underwent a kind of crisis that finds expression in the literature of the period. Hugh Trevor-Roper discusses “The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century” (1968) in socio-political terms, with reference to elements such as war, revolution and persecution. The decades on either side of 1600 in Germany were marked by bad weather, poor harvests, famine, socio-political unrest and the Thirty Years War (Lehman 1980, 105ff.). Icelandic scholars have long emphasized the poverty and humiliation of the Icelandic people during the seventeenth century and explained these elements in terms of Danish misrule and oppression, monopolistic trade, royal absolutism, religious orthodoxy, superstition and witchcraft (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 23), though recently a somewhat different picture of post-Reformation Icelandic society has emerged, suggesting that during the seventeenth century the country may have been more complex and colorful than had previously been supposed (Helgi Þorláksson 1984, 1997, 2003 and 2004, Árni Daníel Júlíusson 1996 and Loftur Guttormsson 1998). Sea-fishing, for example, was more prominent than a century later; weather conditions early in the period were relatively benign; innovative agricultural methods were adopted; there were encouraging signs of life in education and the arts; and contacts with countries other than Denmark were closer than was

later the case (Helgi Þorláksson 1997, 24-35). Nevertheless the seventeenth century was a time of great conflict and contrast, and in many ways life in Iceland was as hard then as it had ever been. Thus, when baroque poets refer to the Wheel of Fortune and worldly instability, these were not just literary *topoi* or rhetorical flourishes derived from Latin verse, but rather reflections of the realities of everyday life to which they felt the need to give expression.

Research has shown that poetry and prose of the baroque period were more closely associated with social life and official events than was subsequently the case after writers became more preoccupied with individuals' private lives and feelings. Most literary works were composed for particular purposes and occasions. Baroque scholars have emphasized that poetry from this period was not *Erlebnisdichtung*, based on authorial feelings and experience. Instead, and as prescribed by classical rhetoric, poets should not allow their own personalities to obtrude. It is thus an anachronistic misconception to look for "Erlebnis" [life experience] in baroque poetry (Meid 1986, 31; van Ingen 1966, 47). The absence of any extant love poems by Hallgrímur has prompted questions concerning the poet's views on his wife and marriage. Yet seventeenth-century attitudes to poetry meant that even if such love poems existed, it would be pointless or even misleading to draw conclusions from their content as to the poet's private life. This is not to deny that poets or authors could express themselves sincerely in their compositions and write from the heart, but it does mean that in the minds of poet and audience alike verse was generally no place for personal expression or depictions of the writer's inner life. More important were the influence that a work ought to have on readers and listeners, and the demands imposed by the subject matter itself as to how best it could be verbalized.

German scholars have emphasized the importance of approaching baroque literature on its own terms—that is, by trying to identify and understand the literary and aesthetic theories and priorities that inform it. The *Sturm und Drang* years of the romantic era have, it is argued, somewhat distorted research into seventeenth-century literature. Romantic attitudes to poetry, with the emphasis on self-expression, the poet's emotional life, and the idea of original genius, have encouraged modern readers to make inappropriate demands

on verse written in earlier periods. The arresting subject matter and personal expression that modern readers find attractive were never priorities for seventeenth-century poets, while insufficient attention is paid to the qualities that were valued, notably the artful presentation of subject matter, based on the theories of classical rhetoric.

Many scholars of baroque literature have drawn attention to the importance of analyzing not just primary poetic texts but also the many works written for the guidance of poets—the so-called *artes poeticae*. Attitudes to language, poetics and literature as reflected in other seventeenth-century writings deserve close study, in order to extend and refine our understanding of writers' discursive and artistic priorities. Accordingly, attention has been directed to poetic forms, metrics, prosodic innovation and experimentation, the use of rhyme and related sonic effects, figures of speech and other verbal ornamentation, and to the impact of rhetorical theories on how best to structure and express ideas and arguments. Such research has served to highlight the importance of classical rhetoric. In Germany the links between baroque literature and the discipline of rhetoric (still taught in some universities there) have been very close, as reflected in the title of Wilfried Barner's *Barockrhetorik*, a fundamental work for understanding baroque texts. This concern with external poetic form is linked to interest in poetic modes or literary genres; genre theory and genre research have recently attracted much attention in British and American universities.

The baroque period has often been further subdivided into three periods—early, high, and late. The German scholar Wilhelm Friese has defined Hallgrímur Pétursson as “früh-barokk” [early baroque] (Friese 1999, 19), and there is certainly nothing in the Icelandic poetry of the period that can be called “high baroque” in European terms. Yet we may say that baroque influence in Iceland is discernible from the time of humanism's first impact, notably in the new views that find expression in the scholarship and poetry of Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás. The poet Bjarni Gisurarson of Þingmúli is another instructive representative of the Icelandic baroque, and it may well be that other poets will deserve to be added to this short list after their works are explored in greater detail. The accomplished rhetorician Bishop Jón Vídalín is an excellent example of the baroque sensibility in Iceland, as

has been noted in the most recent edition of his *Húss-Postilla* [House sermons] (Gunnar Kristjánsson 1995). Páll Vídalín and his pupil and friend Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík also belong in this group. Baroque influence in Icelandic poetry may reasonably be said to reach its peak in the works of Hallgrímur Pétursson and Stefán Ólafsson (discussed below) and also in the poetry and poetics from Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík, though by living his whole life in Copenhagen Jón is unlikely to have exercised much influence in Iceland. Moreover, even as his writings bear the marks of baroque influence, he is also a spokesman for the new insights of the Enlightenment.

Another way of approaching baroque literature is to distinguish between its different audiences and readerships—between, on the one hand, poetry associated with the royal courts in Copenhagen and Stockholm; and, on the other hand, poetry composed in the non-courtly communities of rural Iceland (Friese 1968, 165 and 218) that lie close to the heartland of seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry. Examples of court poetry include the texts composed by the Swedish poet Georg Stiernhielm (1598–1672) for ballets at the Swedish court. Yet it was not just a question of differences between court and country. In Iceland there was also a small class of officials, all of whom had been educated overseas and were capable of composing verse appropriate to their social status. There is every indication that the poetry associated with the schools and episcopal sees at Hólar and Skálholt was different from that composed elsewhere in the country; it included occasional verse, neo-Latin compositions, and other learned pieces resembling European poetry (see Sigurður Pétursson 1995, 97); and the formal education system at the two schools also involved (among other activities) the copying of medieval manuscripts.

It is important, therefore, to be aware of the socio-literary contexts of the time, and to analyze the social classes and groups for whom works were composed. Socio-geographical perspectives also merit attention, in terms of whether texts were intended for town or country, royal court or clerical community. It is in the structure of Icelandic society and the role of poetry within that society that answers can be found as to how best to distinguish seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry from equivalent works written in mainland Europe at the same time. Though much Icelandic verse certainly has its own distinctive

character, comparison with European poetry can be illuminating and help modern readers better to understand and appreciate verse that can otherwise seem rather unusual. For example, Icelandic literature has much in common with seventeenth-century Swedish literature, though this depends on the particular genre and its social context. Several baroque poets in Stockholm describe themselves as ascending the slopes of Mount Parnassus to meet Apollo and the Muses, or as court poets resting in sylvan glades, wandering through meadows, singing and playing their musical instruments, pastoral images virtually unknown in Icelandic poetry of the same period.

Post-Reformation verse in Iceland has never attracted the same level of attention as that from the Middle Ages or the Romantic era, and has primarily been studied in its domestic context. The present study aims to extend that range of investigation by exploring the works of several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Icelandic poets in the light of compositional methods and influences from Scandinavia and mainland Europe. Learned Icelanders in the seventeenth century certainly looked abroad (notably to Copenhagen) for their education, they translated works from German and other languages, and they wrote and composed verse in Latin.

In examining seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry within a European context the importance of neo-Latin verse should be recognized. Poetry in Icelandic and Latin largely followed the same rules and practices taught in all Latin schools. For a long time the neo-Latin poetry composed in Iceland attracted little attention, no doubt in part because few scholars were interested in texts that did not seem essentially Icelandic. However, recent research into Scandinavian neo-Latin verse has generated a number of significant publications, while Sigurður Pétursson has written illuminatingly about the work of Icelandic neo-Latin poets, not least in his 1995 survey essay. It has been shown that several innovative features of seventeenth-century neo-Latin verse soon found their way into Icelandic vernacular poetry, though there was also reciprocal influence. Thus neo-Latin verse represents an important link between Icelandic and mainland European poetry (Johannesson 1968, 55).

The Swedish scholar Kurt Johannesson (1984) has argued that baroque influence in Scandinavian literature may derive both from

new southern European notions about the composition of poetry and from the systematic rediscovery of native Scandinavian literary traditions. This is certainly true in respect of Icelandic verse. Jacob Benediktsson has shown the extent of humanist influence on the writings of Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned. Humanist poesy was characterized by elegance, moderation, wit, clarity and accessibility of style. Baroque rhetorical art thus represented a direct continuation of (rather than departure from) humanist literary values; there were no new theories involved. Any distinction between the two styles is identifiable only in the poetry itself—the fondness of baroque poets for neologisms, onomatopoeia and other kinds of figurative and sonic experiments (Ueding 1976, 95). In Iceland the baroque found expression not only in the choice of particular genres and treatment of particular themes, and in linguistic artistry and rhetorical invention, but also in poets' eagerness to revive and exploit the complexity of medieval *dróttkvæði* form and to enrich poetic language with Eddic borrowings. Thus the distinctiveness of the Icelandic poetic tradition emerges more clearly when compared with European traditions and tastes.

Along with new ideas about meter and style, unfamiliar neo-classical literary genres appeared in Denmark and elsewhere, including epic, pastoral, satire and the verse epistle (*Dansk litteraturhistorie* 3 1983, 99). These last two forms also became popular in Iceland, as with Stefán Ólafsson's Icelandic and Latin verse epistles. Icelandic satirical verse certainly grew out of particular seventeenth-century social circumstances but we may note that satire in a variety of forms was also a prominent feature of European literature at this time. Linked to that genre were poems about transience and evanescence, while another baroque element that found favor was occasional verse, one of the innovatory genres whose roots lay in neo-Latin poetry. There was no Icelandic equivalent to European baroque love poetry, in all its remarkable diversity, though individual examples can be found in the works of Stefán Ólafsson. Stefán also translated pastoral verse from Danish, but for the most part such compositions were little known in Iceland at this time. The same can be said of playwriting. As for *rímur*, though these hugely popular but somewhat controversial works were thoroughly Icelandic in style, many were based on popular German

and Danish tales that found their way to Iceland in ever-increasing numbers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and were then translated (Seelow 1989). Lastly, spiritual verse was the common inheritance of European Christian culture and this genre proved to be the most prestigious.

There has as yet been insufficient scholarly exploration of post-Reformation Icelandic metrics, and the present discussion seeks to address such matters where appropriate. The choice of meter played a major role in the artistic presentation of the poet's ideas. European baroque poetry placed great importance on renewing itself by imitating elements from classical poetry, particularly those pleasing to the ear. It is no wonder, therefore, that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century learned Icelandic poets were so attracted to *dróttkvæði* and its variations. The artistic priorities of the baroque period may well have encouraged Icelandic poets to make increasing use of this measure. The present study will show how traditional meters were renewed, as with the use of rhyme, a major element in *dróttkvæði*, in poems written in different measures. Though there will be no special discussion of rhyme in this study, increased interest in metrical complexity and formal elegance in seventeenth-century *rímur* is characteristic of the period.

As we have already noted, all discussion of the baroque is inevitably linked to discussion of rhetoric—its structural rules, conceptual process and stylistic presentation. In his study of the early works of the baroque poet Andreas Gryphius (and in other writings) the German scholar Hans-Henrik Krummacker has argued that the straightforward nature of Gryphius's devotional verse and other poetry and plays should be seen as a definitive mark of the baroque. Krummacker suggests that stylistic simplicity and unostentatious presentation were fully recognized elements in baroque poetics—they were in no sense “un-baroque.” He notes that a poet such as Gryphius, who was fully capable of composing in a highly rhetorical baroque style, would sometimes adopt a markedly plainer style, especially when treating devotional matters. Far from deviating from rhetorical orthodoxy, the poet was in fact deploying a recognized rhetorical style, that of the *sermo humilis*. At the same time Krummacker emphasizes the importance of baroque research paying due heed to all literary genres, including the vast number of hymns composed, and the many

meditative and edifying texts, both original and translated, that were a great influence on poets and poetry.

The present study seeks to explore the distinctive elements in the poetry of Hallgrímur Pétursson, to analyze how far his verse and prose were influenced by rhetorical tradition, and to assess whether it is possible to identify the definitive characteristics of a baroque text. There will be discussion of the influence of classical rhetoric—was it confined to just a limited number of the literary genres favored by Hallgrímur, such as occasional verse, or was its impact more pervasive, not least in his hymns and devotional poetry? My research into Hallgrímur's poetry has led me to echo Kurt Johannesson's verdict on the Swedish baroque poet Lars Wivallius: namely, that close examination of his verse serves to highlight its formal and rhetorical virtuosity rather than its apparent simplicity (Kurt Johannesson 1968, 21–22). This is confirmed by Hallgrímur's use of rhetorical tradition and the ways in which he colors his poetry with internal and external rhyme. The poetry of Stefán Ólafsson, comparable to and yet quite different from that of Hallgrímur, will also be examined in some detail, as will the extent to which the works of both writers can be illuminated by the idea of the baroque. Firstly, though, the verse of Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás will be explored, for his achievement may be seen as anticipating that of Hallgrímur and Stefán—a Renaissance man whose writings also heralded the arrival of the baroque.

Hallgrímur Pétursson has been called a “barokkmeistari” [baroque master]³ and “der isländische Barockdichter” [the Icelandic baroque poet].⁴ How ought we to understand this title? Was it simply that Hallgrímur was alive during the period now often referred to as baroque, or was he significantly touched by the baroque literary sensibility of those years? Is the baroque a foreign notion that is difficult to accommodate within Icelandic literary history, or did its ideas of verbal artistry resonate in Iceland as well as in mainland Europe? And to what extent will our conclusions affect our sense of Hallgrímur's achievement as a poet? In addressing these issues we must first examine the term “baroque” and consider its applicability in an Icelandic context. Though baroque style and the baroque age will play

3. Jón Árni Friðjónsson 1990, 165.

4. Jón Bjarni Atlason 2002, 72.

their part in this discussion, the idea of a baroque text needs first to be explored—indeed, we must first ask whether any such texts exist in Icelandic. The chapters about Hallgrímur’s poetry will approach his works in terms of traditional literary genres, but an attempt will also be made to identify the particular socio-economic features of his age, and to consider whether his works can reasonably be characterized as baroque.